

# **BLM'S DROUGHT POLICY**

## **PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:**

Extreme and prolonged drought conditions over the last several years have had a severe effect on much of Montana and adjacent states, and continues to impact surface water supplies, soils, vegetation and animals grazing on BLM rangelands.

## **ISSUES:**

Because of widespread and extreme effects of the drought of the late 1980s, the Montana BLM developed and issued the BLM's first draft policy in October 1988 for public review. After incorporating public comments, the BLM adopted that policy in January 1989. The BLM has updated the policy every year since and, in 2003, the WO issued a Bureauwide policy to reflect the changes in regulations. By providing guidance during winter months, land managers avoid last-minute surprises concerning land uses and grazing strategies on BLM permits and leases.

Field assessments and remote electronic instruments collect data for snowpack, stream flow, reservoir water supplies, and vital soil moisture at frequent intervals. This information and that from other agencies is summarized and discussed by the Governor's Drought Advisory Committee. Current data indicates concern for most of Montana, especially the southwestern quarter of the state. Field personnel continue to observe weather conditions and collect appropriate data.

## **MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:**

The Montana BLM's written policy, supported by the WO Drought Policy, presents existing laws and regulations used to guide livestock grazing in Montana and the Dakotas during periods of drought. The BLM has provided copies of this policy to grazing lease holders in the three states several times during the last decade.

Under this policy, the BLM assesses plant growth needs such as soil moisture, effective precipitation, environmental demands, plant vigor, and the amount of available water and forage prior to and during the grazing season. Emphasis is placed on allotments having multiple resource values, grazing problems, and a high percentage of federal land. If resource assessments indicate a need to delay livestock turnout, reduce livestock numbers, or close area(s) to grazing, the BLM will work with livestock operators to minimize impacts to their operations. Adjustments in fee payments, including any appropriate refunds, will be made on a case by case basis.

## **BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:**

Most livestock operators, Montana Stock Grower's Association, local or state grazing districts, and all resource advisory councils support BLM's policy on grazing during periods of drought. The BLM is an active participant in the Governor's Drought Advisory Committee and local drought advisory committees and groups. When available and applicable, the BLM provides soil moisture and soil temperature conditions from remote automated weather stations located throughout the state. This information, combined with weather and climate data from other agencies and used with GIS soil data, assists all Montanans in making decisions affecting their farms and ranches. Montana drought information is available from the state's Natural Resource Information System (NRIS) at <http://nris.state.mt.us/drought>. Additional information on a national scale can be obtained at <http://enso.unl.edu/ndmc/>

## **CONTACT:**

William Volk State Soil Scientist/Range Imp & Monitoring Program Lead 406 896-5029